

Obama's Medal for Karski Shines Light On Poland's Real World War II Record

By Alex Storzynski for *The Huffington Post*
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President Obama's Presidential Medal of Freedom for Jan Karski shows how far Poles went to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. After escaping Soviet imprisonment, and being savagely tortured by the Gestapo, Karski still risked his life to sneak past German guards into the Jewish ghetto to see how the Nazis were abusing Jews. Karski then disguised himself as a Ukrainian guard to visit a transfer station that sorted Jews on their way to the death camps.

As an eyewitness to the German murder machine, the Polish underground sent Karski on a secret mission to tell the Allies what was happening. In 1942, the Polish underground government issued a report called "The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland." It said: "The new methods of mass slaughter applied during the last few months confirm that the German authorities aim with systematic deliberation at the total extermination of the Jewish population."

Karski took his eyewitness accounts and the Polish government's report to London and Washington to ask Great Britain and the United States to stop the Holocaust.

The allies did nothing.

President Franklin Roosevelt showed more interest in how the Germans treated horses than how they treated Jews. When Karski told Jewish Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter what was happening, Frankfurter replied, "I do not believe you." Winston Churchill refused to meet with Karski to discuss saving the Jews. Had the allies acted when Karski spoke up, millions could have been saved.

For Jewish-Americans, Poland is understandably a painful topic because it's where the Holocaust happened. But few know that the Polish government tried to stop it. Yes, there were Poles who had blood on their hands. Their actions were inexcusable. And yes, like all countries, Poland has its fair share of anti-Semites and bigots. But Poland had more than its fair share of heroes. They risked their lives, and the lives of their children, to save Jews from Nazi Germany.

Karski was not alone.

Poland was the only country where hiding a Jew was punishable by death for your entire family. Hans Frank, the Governor General of German occupied Poland ordered his army to hang posters in Polish cities that said: "Jews face the death penalty for leaving their neighborhoods [the ghettos], but so will anyone who in any way helps them to hide. This includes taking them in for the night, giving them a lift in a vehicle of any kind, feeding runaway Jews or selling them food."

Despite facing the death penalty, Poles risked their lives to save Jews. Many were killed for doing so. Others, like Irena Sendler, were tortured, and still did not reveal where Jews were hiding. Sendler rescued 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto and found Poles willing to hide them. It took at least ten Poles for every Jewish child that was saved. Once in Christian hands, the children were fed, clothed and given a new home. They were taught to pray in Polish in case they were stopped and questioned by Germans. They were given Christian names and forged birth certificates provided by priests. Yet their true identities were preserved, so that they could be returned to their parents after the war.

The underground created a clandestine organization called Zegota, the Polish Council to Aid Jews, which rescued tens of thousands of Jews from the German killing machine. At Yad Vashem in Israel, which honors the righteous who saved Jews during World War II, are the names of 6,339 people from Poland, more than any other country.

And this still does not include people who should be honored, like Polish Captain Witold Pilecki, who volunteered to be arrested by the Germans and sent to Auschwitz to try to organize a prison break. Pilecki's report smuggled out of Auschwitz has finally been translated into English and published as, "The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery."

The reason Hitler built concentration camps in Poland is that's where the Jews were. Poland is not just where Jews died - it's where they lived. Poland was the center of Jewish life for centuries, dating back to the Statue of Kalisz in 1264, which provided civil liberties for Jews and explicit penalties for crimes against Jews. As a result, Poland is where Talmudic scholarship grew and Chasidim began. It's where Yiddish flourished. It's where numerous Jewish artists such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Artur Szyk, and Artur Rubenstein honed their art.

Next year, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will finally be unveiled in Warsaw. These exhibits about Jewish life and history must be told and preserved.

It is long overdue for an American President to listen to the message that Jan Karski sent to the west about what was going on in Poland. If Roosevelt had listened to Karski, many more Jews would have been saved. Let's not forget them. And let's not forget the other Poles, who like Karski, risked their lives.

Perhaps Poles could have done more to save Jews during WW II, but no one did more than the Poles to save Jews during the Holocaust.

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Founded in 1925, [the Kosciuszko Foundation](#) promotes closer ties between Poland and the United States through educational, scientific and cultural exchanges. It awards up to \$1 million annually in fellowships and grants to graduate students, scholars, scientists, professionals, and artists, and promotes Polish culture in America. The Foundation has awarded scholarships and provided a forum to Poles who have changed history.